AFP Fellowship in Inclusion and Philanthropy

Fellow Project Summary

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Background

My organization, The Scott Mission (TSM), is headquartered in an older building built in the 1960s-1970s. The structure located at 502 Spadina Avenue contains 3 storeys above ground and 1 level below ground and generally lacks many features considered to be the modern standard for physical accessibility for a service-providing organization.

The Scott Mission runs many programs out of its downtown Toronto location to provide emergency relief to those struggling with poverty. Among those services are a soup kitchen, food and clothing bank, men's overnight shelter, and shower and laundry facilities. In recent years, there has been a growing concern among staff that our ability to provide fair and equal access to our programs is being impeded by the outdated and inaccessible physical facilities. With the introduction of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) in 2005, addressing these concerns has become of greater and more pressing importance.

Objectives

The objective of this project is to develop the tools, policies, and protocols that will move The Scott Mission into a greater degree of AODA compliance. Considering the limited time frame available, the scope of the project will focus on the following three aspects:

1. Development of an **evacuation plan** for TSM that will specifically outline protocols for the evacuation of individuals with mobility or other physical accessibility concerns. Having such a plan in place is important for TSM in welcoming individuals with disabilities while being compliant with local fire code.
2. Recommendations for changes to the **physical facilities** to make TSM's headquarters physically accessible, with a focus on creating an environment to allow for the equal hiring of staff and volunteers.
3. Accessibility **education and training** for all staff that will inform the development of policies, practices, and future program and building planning.

Process & Results

1. I identified the heads of departments who would be directly responsible for accessibility at TSM. They represented departments with different functions in the organization (from staffing to facilities management) and could offer multi-faceted perspectives on the project's goals and impact.
2. By leveraging my network, I was able to connect with non-profit professionals knowledgeable on matters of accessibility, who also had lived experience with disabilities. They shared their expertise and directed me to a wealth of resources on the subject. They also conducted a site visit and shared recommendations for ways to make the facilities more accessible. At a later date, they will also develop and lead staff training sessions on accessibility with TSM program managers.

3. I conducted a confidential and voluntary survey of staff and volunteers, asking them to self-assess their need for assistance in case of an emergency evacuation. The information collected would be used to make arrangements for anyone requiring assistance and to inform the creation of an evacuation plan.
4. Working with TSM's existing emergency procedures, the results of the survey, and looking to similar agencies for ideas, I drafted a cohesive, comprehensive, and easy-to-understand emergency evacuation plan.

Summary of Learnings/Tips

1. Doing something is better than nothing. Don't let the potential scope of the task keep you from getting started!
2. Familiarize yourself with the current procedures, and look to other organizations for understanding. There's no need to reinvent the wheel!
3. Seek guidance from experts and those with lived experience.
4. Seek collaboration across organizational functions.
5. Invite stakeholders to participate in the process.
6. Clearly communicate the evacuation plan to all parties, including visitors and volunteers.
7. Have staff, volunteers, and others who use your facility self-assess their need for assistance. You will want to plan for any such need before an *actual* emergency!